

Mosier Fire Chief Calls Shipping Bakken Crude Oil By Rail 'Insane'

by Amelia Templeton OPB | June 4, 2016 4:39 p.m. | Updated: June 7, 2016 10:32 a.m.



Jim Appleton, Mosier fire chief, speaks Saturday, June 4, 2016, following the derailment of an oil train in his town near Hood River Friday.

Amelia Templeton/OPB

Jim Appleton, the fire chief in Mosier, Ore., said in the past, he's tried to reassure his town that the Union Pacific Railroad has a great safety record and that rail accidents are rare.

He's changed his mind.

After a long night working with hazardous material teams and firefighters from across the Northwest to extinguish a fire that started when a train carrying Bakken crude derailed in his town, Appleton no longer believes shipping oil by rail is safe.

"I hope that this becomes death knell for this mode of shipping this cargo. I think it's insane," he said. "I've been very hesitant to take a side up to now, but with this incident, and with all due respect to the wonderful people that I've met at Union Pacific, shareholder value doesn't outweigh the lives and happiness of our community." Federal regulators say oil from the Bakken region is [more flammable](#) and more dangerous, than other types of crude. It's been involved in a string of rail disasters, including a tragedy that killed 47 people in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec.

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Emergency responders in communities along rail lines in the Northwest [have struggled](#) to prepare for a possible disaster. Much of the focus has been on stockpiling critical equipment needed to fight oil spills and fires, including a special type of fire suppression foam.

But Appleton said that foam was of relatively little use for the first 10 hours after the spill in Mosier. It couldn't be directly applied to the main rail car that was on fire.

"The rationale that was explained to me by the Union Pacific fire personnel is that the metal is too hot, and the foam will land on the white-hot metal and evaporate without any suppression effect," he said. "That was kind of an eye-opener for me."

Appleton said crews spent 8 to 10 hours cooling down the adjacent rail cars with water before the final burning car was cool enough to be extinguished using the firefighting foam. Fire tending trucks drew water from the Columbia River using a nearby orchard supply line, and applied roughly 1,500 gallons of water per minute to the white-hot rail cars.

Other first responders described a chaotic scene, and difficulty getting to the site of the accident due to a massive snarl of traffic on Interstate 84.

"It looked like the apocalypse," said Elizabeth Sanchez, the Yakima Nation's environmental manager and the head of its hazmat crew. "You get into town, and there is just exhausted firefighters everywhere you look. It was quite scary."